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ABSTRACT

Parents and children today can expect to share nearly half a century of life in contexts likely to be increasingly complex and emotionally stressful. One way to explore the quality of adults' relationships with their parents is to compare their assessments of these relationships with their assessments of another family relationship that also contains elements of obligation, their relationships with their children. For this study, data were analyzed from 658 adults, all of whom had at least one child and at least one surviving parent. These adults reported that their relationships with parents were significantly less enjoyable and satisfying than relationships with their children, even though they felt that their children demanded or required significantly more from them than did their parents. Women reported significantly less positive relationships and also felt more was demanded from them. In another study 117 adults were asked to describe their interactions with their parents and their feelings about what they would do for them. Over 40% stated they would do anything their parents needed, some from choice and others from duty. Given the duration and complexity of relationships between adults and their parents, developing research and psychoeducational programs directed toward improving them should be a high priority. (ABL)

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Family Relations of the Middle Generation: Adults' Frustrations and Satisfactions With Parents and Children

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Family Relations of the Middle Generation:
Adults' Frustrations and Satisfactions With Parents and Children

As our population ages, the increasing overlap between generations focuses attention on relationships between children and their parents across the lifespan. Parents and children today can expect to share nearly half a century of life in contexts likely to be increasingly complex and emotionally stressful (Hagestad, 1988; Giordano, 1988; Ansello, 1988).

Our society has powerful expectations about the role grown children are expected to fill in relation to their parents, but confusing models of the expected quality of those relationships(Sussman, 1985; Troll, 1988). Adults are expected to maintain regular contact with their parents, to offer emotional support and to provide help if needed, and most adults meet these expectations. However, it is unclear whether this contact and aid should be or is motivated by feelings of closeness and enjoyment of the relationship or by filial obligation (Jarrett, 1985; Walker, et al, 1987). Furthermore, we know very little about how much closeness and enjoyment adults actually experience in relationships with their parents, how they evaluate interactions with their parents, or how their feelings of obligation and the quality of their relationships with parents are related.

One way to explore the quality of adults' relationships with their parents is to compare their assessments of these relationships with their assessments of another family relationship that also contains elements of obligation, their relationships with their children. For this study, we analyzed data from a sample of 658 adults aged 18-65, (average age = 38) all of whom had at least one child and at least one surviving parent, and had completed an extensive psychosocial inventory focusing on stress and satisfaction invarious areas of their lives.

Comparisons from six items and the two resultant composite measures showed that these adults reported relationships with parents to be significantly less enjoyable and satisfying than relationships with their children (Factor 1), even though they felt that their children demanded or required significantly more from them than did their parents (Factor 2, see Table 1). Women compared to men reported significantly less positive relationships and also felt more was demanded from them from both children and parents (see Table 2).

Respondents were asked to answer the questions in terms of the child who seems to create the most stress for them and in terms of the parent who seems to create the most stress. Each question was answered on a 5-point scale, with possible responses ranging from "never or almost never" to "almost always." While 71% said they often or almost always think they have a good relationship with their child, only 62% responded this positively about their parent. Another 16% said they seldom or never think they have a good relationship with their parent, while only 7% saw their relationship with a child this negatively. While 16% said they often or always find their parent annoying, only 7% found their child equally annoying. While 84% said they often or almost always enjoy being with their child, only 62% said they enjoy a parent this much.

These adults' dissatisfactions with their parents as compared to their

children do not appear to stem from feelings of obligation to parents nor from excessive demands. While only 18% said they sometimes, often, or almost always feel their parent is too dependent on them, a full 32% felt this way about their child. Similarly, while only 35% said they at least sometimes feel their parent expects too much from them, almost half (48%) feel their child at least sometimes expects too much. And while only 32% said they sometimes, often or almost always feel frustrated with their parent, almost half (46%) reported this about their child.

Furthermore, it seems unlikely that such dissatisfactions will affect the level of care adults are willing to provide to parents. There is a considerable body of research showing that adults do not abandon their parents (Brody, 1985; Mancini and Blieszner, 1989).

In one preliminary study exploring this issue, we asked 117 adults (28 males, 89 females) aged 21-67 to complete detailed questionnaires describing their interactions with parents and their feelings about what they would do for them. In response to the questions: "What (if anything) do you feel you owe your parents now or in the future? What would you be willing to do for them?" many placed no limits on what they would do or expect of themselves. Forty-four percent of these grown children (11 males, 41 females) answered that they would be willing to do anything their parents needed or to help in any way they could, some from choice, others from duty. For example, a 46-year-old male said, "I feel I owe my parents a lot. I would be willing to do whatever is necessary to take care of them as they get older." A 29-year-old female said, "I will do for them whatever they ask me to do for them. I have no fear that they will take advantage of me or become a burden in any way."

An additional 53% of these adults (17 males, 46 females) said that they would be willing to help their parents if needed, but recognized some limits in the level or type of help they felt able to give. For example, a 31-year-old woman said, "I would be willing to do whatever is in my power to enhance their well-being while not damaging mine or my family's well-being." A 49-year-old man said, "We would take them into our family if that was necessary, but we would not change jobs to move closer to them."

Only two of the 117 said they were unwilling to help their parents. In almost every case, even those grown children who reported frequent conflict and dissatisfaction in their relationships with their parents continued to maintain regular contact and planned to help parents who need help. For example, one 49-year-old woman who described her 81-year-old mother as a "nosy busybody who is very manipulative and controlling," went on to say " I do feel that I owe Mother a great deal. She has always been available to me when I needed help, so I can do nothing less for her."

Perhaps the issue now is the potential for improving these relationships. If, as our data indicate, only sixty percent of adults usually enjoy being with their parents or generally feel they have a good relationship with their parents, interactions with parents may often be more stressful than pleasant, more motivated by obligatio than choice. And if, as our data indicate, only slightly more than half the women usually enjoy these relationships, this has implications for the caregiving role many of these women will eventually assume. For example, some research suggests that both adult-child caregivers and elderly parent care-recipients find the caregiving situation more satisfying and less stressful when th initial relationship

between them is positive (Stoller and Pugliesi, 1989; Parsons, Cox & Kimboko, 1989). Given the duration and complexity of relationships between adults and their parents, developing research and psychoeducational programs directed toward improving them should be a high priority.

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Table 1: Results are presented for six items in which respondents rated both a parent and a child on a 5-point scale that varied from "never or almost never" to "almost always". Items phrased positively were reversed, so that **low scores always represent more positive responses.** A principle component analysis was computed in which two clusters of items were found that accounted for over 70% of the variance. One factor, labeled "Degree of Enjoyment", indicated respondents enjoyed their child more than their parent. The other factor, labeled "Level of Demands," indicated that respondents also found their child more demanding than their parent. For each of the two clusters, means of the composite scores and the average response of each item, the F-Test from a mixed mode least squares analysis of variance (with df = 1, 657) and p-value are presented below.

Item:	**Mean**		**F-Ratio**	**p-value**
	Parent	**Child**		
Degree of Enjoyment				
Composite Score (average/item)	**2.31**	**1.93**	**73.84**	**< .001**
Has Good Relationship With	2.32	1.97	39.11	< .001
Enjoys Being With	2.31	1.64	191.01	< .001
Finds Annoying	2.30	2.18	4.94	< .05
Level of Demands				
Composite Score (average/item)	**1.84**	**2.35**	**257.67**	**< .001**
Expects Too Much	2.24	2.54	28.40	< .001
Too Dependent	1.67	2.02	44.25	< .001
Frustrated With	2.10	2.50	53.64	< .001

Table 2. Gender differences in ratings for the composite score of Degree of Enjoyment and of Level of Demands of a parent and of a child are presented based on the results of a factorial mixed mode least squares analysis of variance. For both scales the main effect for gender was significant ($F(1,657) = 10.35$ and 46.69 respectively, $p < .001$ in both cases) such that women compared to men rated both relationships more negatively on both factors. The interaction between gender and person being rated was not statistically significant in either case.

Scale		Mean		
		Parent	**Child**	**Mean***
Degree of Enjoyment	Women (n=372)	2.42	1.98	2.20
	Men (n=286)	2.16	1.87	2.02
	Mean	2.31	1.93**	

		Mean		
		Parent	**Child**	**Mean***
Level of Demands	Women (n=372)	1.91	2.58	2.24
	Men (n=286)	1.74	2.05	1.89
	Mean	1.84	2.35**	

* $p < .001$

** $p < .001$, see Table 1